

Springs of hope: The state of ‘public’ water and alternatives in Asia

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On behalf of my two co-authors from the university, I would like to thank the MSP for this initiative. The MSP is a unique initiative as it combines the expertise of the academe and the experiences of activists. What I will be talking about is the state of public and community water in Asia and how alternatives to privatization and commercialization offer springs of hope for us advocating and campaigning for a new public model of water governance and management.

Asia is a diverse region—in terms of history, culture, political economy, natural resources and endowments, growth patterns and current development, different sub-regions show wide disparities. In terms of water resources, the region is also well endowed with sub-regional and seasonal variations.

However, much of the debate in the region centers around access to water and sanitation, and who provides these basic services. While the official MDG reports that the region has surpassed its targets of providing clean water with an average of 88%, it masks the rural-urban disparities and class divides. Sanitation also remains a big challenge and the region is far from meeting its commitments.

The region has also been known as a laboratory of failed privatization experiments and structural adjustment programs. However, water service provision is still largely public and community—varying from large centralized systems managed by the state and municipal governments to community and village-level systems. There are bad public water utilities but there are also numerous public and community models that are alternatives to the commercialization and privatization of water abound. We have uncovered examples of defending public sector against privatization and commercialization but I will share with you are examples of creative, new ways of strengthening the public and community water service delivery.

One, there are innovative models of public service delivery, which are neither private or old-style public. An example of this is the Change Management Initiative of the Tamil Nadu Water Board in India, a public utility that provides drinking water to 60 million people and the delivery of irrigation water to the farms of more than one million families. The board engaged into a change management process involving shift in perspectives and attitudes of its water engineers and transformation of the institutional culture using a process-oriented participatory methodology based on their traditional practice called *Koodam*, a Tamil word for gathering and social space, and for consensus that implies harmony, diversity, equality and justice. The experiment transformed the water engineers and providers from technical people into “managers of the commons”, at the center of which is real partnership between the government and communities. This democratization experiment, which started 5 years ago is now making waves outside the state of Tamil Nadu and last year, they just created a national level platform for public water operator partnerships that involves communities.

Second, there are existing public modes of water service delivery that were no longer appropriate for the service area, for reasons such as population growth, increase in urban poor settlements, depletion of water sources and deteriorating infrastructure that were not entirely threatened by privatization or commercialization. In this case, utilities embarked on alternatives to reinvigorate and improve the delivery of their water systems. For instance, the Dhaka Water and Sewage Authority in Bangladesh which was legally constrained from providing service connections to slum communities because of problems in land tenure. But by entering into cooperative arrangements with non-governmental organizations, the utility was able to establish communal points which improved access to clean water for the informal settlers and urban poor. The other example is the Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority in Cambodia which rehabilitated a war-torn water distribution system through the strengthening of management, which consequently providing water to poor communities. Although this was financed by the Asian Development Bank, the case provided that business-as-usual and privatization were not the only options for the public sector.

Finally, there are cases of remunicipalization and renationalization in Asia. I won't deal with them now as we have a workshop devoted to the topic later. But what I would emphasize is that even in a privatized set up like Metro Manila water, community initiatives are ensuring that water services remain in the public or community control and domain. An example is the case of Bagong Silang Community Water Service Cooperative in the west zone of Metro Manila, Philippines. The community-based water system, managed by water users, secured a dependable water supply from the private company Maynilad Water. And through a cooperative, democratic control and peer-level monitoring and enforcement of rules, the water user association was able to provide safe, clean drinking water to their community, far less cheaper than if they source their water from water tankers and vendors.

So what do we make out of these alternatives?

For us, these alternatives are charting new paths and options for Asia's waterless population. These highlight the necessity and urgency of "a vote for public and community". This means that while there is no perfect alternative, an enabling institutional and policy environment—at appropriate levels – are important for an alternative to develop and flourish.

Secondly, articulating and building alternatives are collective processes, most successful when inclusive, gender-just, transparent, democratic and participatory. The alternatives mapped out emphasize that partnerships between people and communities who have suffered from lack of access to water sanitation and water agencies, whether state-level or municipal, that believe in democratic functioning can ensure safe, equitable and adequate water service provision and sustainable water resource management. **And For real partnership to happen, the government and the public sector need to invest real power to the local communities and not merely as token participants.**

Thirdly, what underpins these alternatives are principles of 'good water governance', which includes and water justice and water as part of the commons and that it is possible to allocate, frame, protect and realize rights in an equitable and sustainable way, as long as those who are historically marginalized and poor and marginalized are part of the process.

The notion of public in the Asian cases does not only mean the state or government but has an expanded notion that includes people or community participation and control.

Finally, I would like to end with some of the challenges that we put forward in the chapter.

One is the decentralization of water systems and devolution of powers characteristic of Asia. For municipal water services, the key question is always institutional, financial, regulatory and technical support to ensure that they are able to provide access to safe, reliable and affordable drinking water and sanitation. But the other corollary point to this is the question of where the locus of decision making is, especially in the context of community and people participation.

Two is the importance of public and development finance in infrastructure and service delivery. In the case of development finance, there is the relationship between states as borrowers, on the one hand and international financial institutions on the other. IFIs in theory and practice have imposed privatization as a conditionality for their loans but in the case of Tamil Nadu and Cambodia, the state could opt not to conform with such impositions. Of course, in reality, there would be limits as to what conditionalities to reject but such limits can serve as the starting point for alternative sources of financing or or project redesigning that can help improve the public sector.

Finally, there is the challenge of moving forward— not only of continuing evidence-based research on alternatives but equally important is advancing the advocacy and practice of alternatives to the commercialization and privatization of water services. What these alternatives offer are not only inspiring stories of public and community water in the region but also the necessity and urgency of creating dynamic governance space for such alternatives to develop and flourish.

We have just began to scratch the surface, we are confident that there are more alternatives out there and we hope you can join us in our collective effort to promote and advocate for them.

Thank you very much!